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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000981

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SUBJECT: ROYAL COMMISSION ON DECENTRALIZATION APPOINTED;
PARLIAMENT MOVES TO RESTORE ELECTION OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILS

REF: AMMAN 712

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) A royal decree appointed a committee stacked with former ministers to help implement King Abdullah's recently-announced federalization initiative. Deputy Prime Minister Muasher will serve as rapporteur between the GOJ and the committee. The Lower House of Parliament voted to rebuff a separate, earlier government initiative that enabled the Ministry of Municipal Affairs to appoint half the members of each municipal council in the country. End summary.

COMMISSION MEMBERS NAMED

12. (U) In accordance with King Abdullah's decentralization initiative announced January 26 (reftel), the palace issued a royal decree January 31 appointing 12 Jordanians to a committee charged with developing proposals to implement the King's plan. The committee includes three former prime ministers (Zeid Rifai, Fayez Tarawneh, and Abdur Rauf Rawabdeh) and six former government ministers. Jordan River Foundation Director Maha Khatib is the only civil society leader (and the sole woman) on the committee. Only two of the members, a former Interior Minister and a current palace advisor, are of Palestinian origin. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Government Performance Marwan Muasher was selected as rapporteur between the GOJ and the committee.

13. (U) The King held an initial meeting with the committee on February 1. In his public remarks, the King highlighted the need for the committee to establish "appropriate mechanisms" using transparent standards to delineate the country into "development regions." Government Spokesperson Asma Khader elaborated that the committee's work would include recommending necessary changes to the country's elections and municipalities laws.

AN INSIDE GLIMPSE

14. (C) Commission member and former PM Fayez Tarawneh told Charge February 3 that the King hopes the decentralization initiative will keep Jordan at the leading edge of reform in the region in light of the recent elections in Iraq and the Palestinian territories. Tarawneh said that although the King indicated he had some specific ideas (e.g., the role of the national parliament should be left as it is), he did not provide any concrete directives, but rather gave the commission almost carte blanche in recommending measures to achieve federalization. Deputy PM Muasher as rapporteur will not direct or actively participate in the commission's work. While there is no official head of the commission, Tarawneh said that Senate President and former PM Zeid Rifai, the dean of Jordan's elder statesmen, was emerging as the group's informal leader.

15. (C) Tarawneh jokingly admitted that he has his commission colleagues were not of "the digital age," but claimed that members had the expertise necessary to draft legislation and develop other measures. He explained that the King had said they were chosen because of the public's trust in them. They were giving themselves a week after the February 1 meeting to "think about" the initiative before getting down to business. According to Tarawneh, the King gave no time frame or deadline, but it was nevertheless clear that he expected the commission to work expeditiously. Strict media silence will be maintained to prevent the ideas and proposals discussed in the commission from leaking to the press.

IT SOUNDS GOOD, BUT ...

16. (C) When asked for their reaction, post contacts have been generally supportive of the decentralization proposal,

although a few confided that they had hoped for more non-governmental figures on the commission. Almost all, however, added that they could not offer an informed opinion since public details of the initiative were so scant. In poloff's discussions with three members of Parliament, all the MPs cautiously welcomed the proposal, either unaware of or unmoved by the possibility that empowered regional legislatures might erode the central parliament's authority (reftel).

LOCAL DEMOCRACY

17. (U) In his decentralization speech, the King stated that the proposed councils for the new regions would work "hand in hand" with municipal councils in prioritizing development needs. Prior to 2003, all members of municipal councils, as well as city mayors, were directly elected. Citing alleged mismanagement and inefficiency, the GOJ adopted a provisional law in November 2002 authorizing the Ministry of Municipal Affairs (with PM approval) to appoint mayors and up to half of the councils in the country's 99 municipalities. (NOTE: The city of Amman is the one exception as its mayor is selected by the Prime Minister and approved by the King. End note.) Voters participating in the summer 2003 municipal elections accordingly chose half of these councils' members, with the rest chosen by the government.

18. (C) The provisional law on municipal elections has been widely criticized, including by many MPs and Islamists, as anti-democratic. On January 31, 2005, the Lower House of Parliament voted to repeal the appointment process in favor of directly electing all municipal council members. MP Mohammad Shawabkeh (East Banker, Madaba) told poloff February 1 that even though he was generally pro-government, he voted to scrap the provisional law as it "didn't really go along with all the talk on democratic reform." Like other provisional laws rejected by the Lower House, it will remain in effect until the Senate also votes against it. Local journalists told post's information officer that some MPs expressed second thoughts about repeal of the law when they realized that direct election of the mayor of greater Amman and the city council could open the way for Islamic Action Front (IAF) dominance of the capital's government, given the IAF's strong support base in the area.

COMMENT

19. (C) The wide latitude apparently given to the commission is not easily reconcilable with the specific goals that Royal Court Minister Rifai earlier laid out to G-8 COMs in Amman (reftel). The palace may have to weigh in with further guidance as the commission's work progresses. Commission members are from the conservative-minded old guard; as Minister of Planning Awadallah commented to Charge, "They are not reformers." Nevertheless, the King views the grassroots reform initiative as irreversible, and the conservative, East Bank flavor of the commission may be a deliberate effort to calm reform phobia felt most strongly among the King's East Bank constituencies.

HALE